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worst of L.A.

by richard meltzer

ME AGAIN: THE GUY WHO "'HATES L.A. for a living" — a bum rap if ever there's been one. Hey, listen, I don't even exactly "hate" L.A. this week, certainly no more than I hate hemorrhoids, genocide or the fact of my own mortality. It's just that anything/everything I ever once found "best" — or let's say "good" — about the place I've long since written to smithereens. 'Tain't much left — writewise — to explore, expound or even pretend about. I've lived here 13 years and it's been about 12 since I've actually "cared for," well, three-four local phenomena simultaneously. In my recently published (avowedly "hateful") *L.A. Is the Capital of Kansas*, I open the final section with a piece called "L.A. Benign: 36 Attractions Which Might Not Make You Sick," written, under duress, four-five years ago. (Even then I had trouble *whimsically* grocery-listing the merely innocuous.) When Jonathan Gold interviewed me for a Q&A that was to have appeared alongside his review in the *Weekly*'s summer book issue (the cassette broke during transcription), he kept asking me, in all apparent innocence, "Hey, c'mon, what's so bad about this town? What's so really y'know baaad about it, huh?" — other, of course, than smog, racism, sexism, cops and Melrose. Gee, I hate to be the one to yell "Fire!" when there *is* a fire, but my answer, if memory serves, went quite a bit like this.

1) The basic this-is-paradise lie (and variations). Identify everything as its opposite: the merciless sun as our friend; sterility as life-nurture; represso-Calvinism as generatrix of pleasure; runaway greed as family-of-man beneficence; anorexia as final word in health/beauty. In India, only marginally less geo-livable than L.A. County, the majority religion's take on *its* hand-as-dealt is "Life? This is *not* life. Life is *somewhere else*" — while here we strut not-life as GOOD life. Or the latest "liberal" self-myth: L.A. as glorious melting pot. (Wow, Thai food! — Salvadoran food! — Vietnamese food!) As if every newcomer to this dump won't in short order *become* the same shit — or be customarily mega-exploited by it.

2) How functionally stupid we are — and/or how foolish. (How "susceptible" to lies great and small; to plans/schemes/shenanigans at our wretched expense.) Hardly any of us "thinks" or sees reason to, certainly not as a routine matter of course, of personal daily policy. With ongoing mentation playing more as "option" than obligation, myriad vested interests can — and regularly do — fool all of the people all of the time, minus (rough estimate) less than 10,000. Do you think even Cleveland (or Squodunk), on the dumbest day of its life, would buy the local equivalent of Randy Newman's "I Love L.A." ("... look at that bum over there, he's down on his knees ...") as an anthemic TRIBUTE to its regional etcetera?

3) ... and how illiterate. Nobody reads. If you can read this, obviously you can *read*, but perhaps you (and/or someone you love) don't read books. Books besides *Less Than Zero*. Books written by *writers*, as opposed to screenwriters — either would-be or actual. Go to a party, call yourself a writer, be ready for "Oh yeah — which films?" (Language as lifespew, lifespew as language, has about as much currency as unicorn tapestries.) Screenwriters: bigger whores than actors — but even whores deserve collective bargaining. I just won't be marching in any picket lines in their behalf, not now, not ever.

4) The bottomless bathos of the human smile. Nobody feels. Or, rather, no one *emotes*. (Y'know "sincerely.") This is, after all, Have-a-Nice-Day Central; every face a posed, overexposed Polaroid of itself; every gathering a 1958 Pepsodent commercial. In a town where *everyone* acts, is always *on*, you'd think we could come up with some new gestures (if not "roles") already. One more generation of this biz (as it feeds back ever deeper to the human so-called soul) and screenwriters will no longer have to "falsify" reality to dredge up their toxic horseshit.

5) The look, the look ... the hideous LOOK. Which, as such, far too few even see. Notice. (Perchance to acknowledge.) L.A. is uniquely (if digitally) ugggggly, has been for quite some time, yet except for incursions by the dread mini-mall almost no one seems to give a flying hoot. High-rises block smog — and suggest urbanization! — so except for obvious clunkers they haven't so far gotten their negative-critical due. Pink/green condos of five-six stories where once stood brick/wood homesteads that would've lasted 200 years? Avert your eyes, okay, sure, but where's there anymore to avert 'em to? Once upon a time, visiting a friend outside Amarillo in desolate (*naturally* unattractive) West Texas, I was greeted with a hearty "Welcome to God's eyesore!" — no truth like the eyetruth as yet unspoken here.

6) Surface uber alles (in more ways than eye-ways). The illusion of possibility fuels so much. The illusion of commodious housing. The illusion of a non-lethal Pacific. The illusion of a "socially redeeming" cinema. The illusion of a *Times* "better," more "politically correct" than the *Herald* (as opposed to merely fatter, slicker, less monochromatic). Package as substance ... makeup as essence ... but even junk (real junk, True Junk) has depth. And how long's it been since this town really knew how to be authentically *trashy*, to do a Frederick's in context, peddling crotchless panties *qua* crotchless panties (as opposed to boutiquing "boudoir enhancers" to jaded yupsters); to produce the likes of *Bride of the Monster* and *The Human Duplicators* (instead of *Waiting for the Moon* and *Tough Guys Don't Dance*)?

7) No local flavor to local TV. Make that *mainstream* local TV. (I'm not talking Nick Edenetti, *Li'l Art's Poker Party* of *Armenian Teletime*.) And why not? Why should the stuff taped here for local consumption be any different from the shit taped or filmed here for network export? It's all one big bucket of scum. The Big Lie, both informationally and culturally, begins here (this town, this biz), but if you live in Boise, say, at least you can catch a hefty enough dose of local airwave twaddle to relieve (at any rate counterbalance) the transregional monolithicness, the demographic neuterdom writ large and BLEAK. Live here, watch TV daily and you'll *be* demographically neutered — with no relief nohow. (Only exception: car, carpet, roller-coaster and supermarket commercials. Oh goody.)

8) The emperor's new sportcoat: media coverage of the Lakers (for instance). It's not that they aren't truly "great." It's just that winning two titles consecutive, in spite of the fact that no one else has done it in 19 years, is simply not in the same *universe* with doing it EIGHT years consec, and 11 of 13, as the (that's right) Boston Celtics managed to do between 1957 and '69. I mean sure, Boston "didn't have to play three seven-game series in a given playoff year," all that shit, but title stats is title stats: Lakers, 6-9 in NBA finals (0-7 before they finally won in '72); Boston, 16-3 (7-2 versus Lakers). All else is bullshit, i.e., hype, p.r., "interpretation." (Unlike the Babe hitting 60 in '27, for inst, which Roger Maris *did* top in 1961.) The *Minneapolis* Lakers, meantime, won five NBA titles between '49 and '54 (and Elgin Baylor, Tommy Hawkins, Rod Hundley et al. did start in Minny), but today's Lakeroids wanna know *that* prehistory like contempo Dodgerfolks wanna know Brooklyn.

9) The radical impermanence of it ALL. Anything that stands today may not, will not, stand tomorrow. Your affordable pad? You'll be on the street in two months, max, to make way for a Yugo showroom. That quaint little cafe you patronize nine days a week? It'll soon be an all-night laundromat. The Wiltern? Forget it. And not only stuff, um, actually fancy. Just as you get a little too *used* to that Burger King down the block (or some horrible generic rock-vid show on channel 56), just its loathsomeness becomes bearably familiar; poof — even it will go. (To be replaced by something far, far more life-threatening.) And not because life hereabouts is in "radical flux" (geez how *romantic*), but because life hereabouts is radically subject to ...

10) The buck *as* Culture. Culture *of* the Buck. As opposed, even, to what it can buy. $$$ as concretized symbol gone *bazoony*; every college kid an implicit business major, every man (and Everyman) a mortgage-foreclosing banker at heart. The homeless (being $$$-less) aren't even *three-fifths* human like the Constitution once declared slaves; are less cotemporal with Official Mammal Life than the contents of a bus-stop garbage can. (Like any other phantoms, ghosts, they simply don't compute.) And what *is* there to buy (other than frozen yogurt, BMWs, Mercedes)? It took me five solid years of shopping, checking all the bath "specialty" shops, before I finally found a long-handled scrub-brush, the kind you can use on your back, and that was at a health-food store. The lack of consumer-prod continuity in so arch-material a town is incredible. You won't find the same brand of hemorrhoid cream at your local pharmacy twice in a row. ■

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